

# article

## Bourdieu and the Big Society: empowering the powerful in public service provision?

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There is concern that the 'localism' promoted by the UK Coalition Government will further empower the already powerful. This paper uses Bourdieu's theory of practice to theorise middle-class public service use. Building on a previous evidence review (Matthews and Hastings, 2013) it considers whether the habitus of the middle-classes enables them to gain disproportionate benefit from public services. Service provision is understood as a 'field' marked by a competitive struggle between social agents who embody class-based power asymmetries. It finds that engagement with the state is a classed practice producing benefits to those already empowered and that localism may exacerbate inequalities.

**key words** Bourdieu • social class • community empowerment • localism

### Introduction

There is a longstanding concern that more affluent 'middle-class' social groups are advantaged in public service provision (Tudor Hart, 1971; Bramley, 1997; Hastings, 2009a). The emphasis of much research has been on cataloguing this advantage – for example quantifying the protection afforded to the services valued by middle-class groups in periods of austerity (Le Grand and Winter, 1986); and revealing inverse distributions of health professionals in relation to health needs (Mercer and Watt, 2007). However, the evidence base on *how* this advantage accrues is relatively thin (Gal, 1998; Hastings et al, 2013); the main exception being the literature which describes the educational advantages of the children of articulate 'pushy parents' (Ball et al, 1995; Crozier, 1997).

Within UK public policy, a clear direction of travel has been evident for over three decades in terms of how public services are provided and citizen–state relations. Since the promotion of privatisation and 'choice' in the 1980s (Pirie, 1992) successive administrations have sought to reshape the state and improve its 'responsiveness' to citizen demands (Imrie and Raco, 2003). John Major's Conservative government of the early 1990s developed choice into a consumerist programme with his Citizen's Charter (Deakin, 1994), while the New Labour administrations of the late 1990s and 2000s further elevated the status of choice within public services by extending

its reach to schooling and healthcare (Davies, 2012). This was paralleled with a range of measures designed to enhance ‘voice’ alongside choice, particularly in relation to neighbourhood regeneration (Durose and Rees, 2012).

The ‘localism’ policies developed by the UK’s Conservative-led coalition government mark the strongest attempt yet to reconfigure citizen–state relations. The 2011 Localism Act enshrines new rights for citizens, rights which effectively extend the choice agenda such that citizens are able to radically re-shape the choices available to them in the local state. Thus a community ‘right to buy’ provides communities with the right to purchase public assets threatened with closure; while the community ‘right to challenge’ facilitates bids by citizens groups (and other non-state actors) to run local authority provided services (UK Parliament, 2011). The localism agenda is complemented by proposals to invigorate ‘social action’ more generally through the ‘Big Society’ – encouraging volunteering, extending individual and community self-help and supporting neighbourhood organising to ‘empower’ citizens to be involved in decision making, particularly, but not exclusively, in relation to neighbourhood planning (HM Government, 2010; Davies and Pill, 2012). New models of service provision such as cooperatives, social enterprises, private companies and ‘free schools’ have been promoted to improve quality and efficiency (HM Government, 2010).

Many commentators have, however, expressed concerns that the version of localism developed by the Coalition government will further empower the already powerful in relation to public services. A particular concern is that neighbourhood organising in disadvantaged communities is underfunded and that there is a lack of initiatives designed to ‘level the playing field’ between communities (Chanan and Miller, 2011; Sullivan, 2012). There are also concerns over the lack of imperatives to address inequities within communities with reduced emphasis on involving ‘hard to reach’ and disadvantaged groups, resulting in the stigmatisation and exclusion of non-elites (Kisby, 2010; Jacobs and Manzie, 2011). Bartels et al (2011) and Davies and Pill (2012) highlight the danger that ‘rolling back’ the supportive infra-structure provided by the state could undermine rather than encourage volunteering. Finally, there are concerns that localism will undermine the strategic redistributive capacity of local state actors to negotiate between competing demands and promote social equity (Kisby, 2010; Jacobs and Manzie, 2012; Sullivan, 2012).

The aim of this paper is critically to assess whether these concerns are warranted. It uses evidence on the processes leading to middle-class advantage from previous periods of public service provision to reflect on the potential implications of the context for citizen–state relations provided for by Localism. To this end, the paper re-interrogates evidence of a ‘realist review’ of the evidence base on how middle-class advantage in relation to public service provision comes about (Matthews and Hastings, 2013). This review synthesised 65 empirical studies from the UK, USA and Scandinavian nations published between 1980 and 2012. Four causal theories were derived from this evidence, theories which explain advantage as the outcome of particular mechanisms operating in specific contexts. Two of the theories focused on the role of middle-class activism – distinguishing between collective and individual engagement. A third highlighted the import of a cultural alignment between service providers and middle-class service users, while the fourth theory identified how middle-class needs and demands are ‘normalised’ in policy and delivery processes (Matthews and Hastings, 2013, 14–15). We re-examine these theories and their associated mechanisms in this paper. In contrast with its predecessor, the paper employs a Bourdieusian theoretical

perspective. This frame facilitates consideration of how specifically class-based processes can underlie the operation of the mechanisms implicated in middle-class advantage.

## Conceptualising class-based advantage in public services: towards a Bourdieusian frame

Whilst the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu have been drawn upon extensively by sociologists interested in how education reproduces social class (for example, Ball et al, 1995; Thomson, 2005), social policy scholarship has not tended to employ Bourdieu in relation to other public services. This may be because Bourdieu tends to be understood as focused on understanding symbolic power or the ‘capacity of systems of meaning... (to) strengthen relations of oppression and exploitation’ (Wacquant, 1993, 1) and the salience of symbolic power in explaining inequities in the distribution of public services may not be immediately obvious. In this section, we outline key Bourdieusian concepts: field and habitus; the transmutation of economic capital into social and cultural capital; and symbolic violence and doxa. We show the value of such a frame for analysing advantage in public services.

Bourdieu conceived of social processes as constituted by the dialectical relationship between ‘objective systems of *positions* and subjective bundles of *dispositions* deposited in agents’ (Wacquant, 2005a, 3 (emphasis in original)) that is, between ‘field’ and ‘habitus’. He argued that social space can be conceived of as a set of social ‘fields’ which can be compared to ‘a game although... a field is not the product of a deliberate act of creation’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, 98). For Bourdieu, fields – such as the legal or education systems – are characterised by the regularised, institutionalised unequal positions of social agents and, crucially, by competitive relations or ‘struggles’ within them (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, 98–104). He uses the notion of the ‘bureaucratic field’, for example, to denote a space in which struggle happens over ‘statist capital and over the material profits (salaries, benefits) and symbolic profits (honors, titles, etc) it provides’ (Bourdieu, 2005, 51). Fields can thus be viewed as both the basis for, and product of, the competitive struggles that take place in social spaces. It is the struggle that (re)produces the unequal distribution of resources within the field and thus a self-reinforcing social hierarchy (Thompson, 2005, 68).

For Bourdieu, ‘habitus’ and social class are intimately associated as ‘different conditions of existence produce different habitus’ (Bourdieu, 1984, 170). Class distinctions produce distinctions in taste and in ways of acting, speaking and thinking: ‘The habitus is necessity internalised and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices’ (Bourdieu, 1984, 170). The idea that ‘[t]he social order inscribes itself in bodies’ (Bourdieu, 2000, 141) – that social agents embody their class position – is important. As a result, habitus is ‘a general, transposable disposition’ (Bourdieu, 1984, 170) and class-based distinctions in thought and behaviour are carried bodily into the struggles underway in different fields. Crucially, success in the ‘field of struggles’ depends on the ‘fit’ of habitus to field: on the ‘coincidence between disposition and position, between the ‘sense of the game’ and the game itself’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, 128). Success therefore depends on the embodiment of ways of behaving and thinking which are appropriate to the ‘rules’ of the game played in that field (Maton, 2008). However, these rules ‘are not explicit and codified’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, 98). Thus, ‘the agent does what he or she ‘has to do’ without

posing it explicitly as a goal, below the level of calculation and even consciousness' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, 128).

An implication of the relationship between field and habitus described thus far is that class struggles are largely unconscious and indeed are pre-determined by class divisions. Bourdieu was, however, at pains to emphasise that some space existed for agency: 'The notion of habitus accounts for the fact that social agents are neither particles of matter determined by external causes, nor little monads guided by internal reasons' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, 136). Indeed, he argued that consciousness could work alongside habitus: 'The lines of action suggested by habitus may very well be accompanied by a strategic calculation of costs and benefits, which tends to carry out at a conscious level the operations that habitus carries out in its own way' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, 131). However, not all agents are in a position to be strategic in this way: the capacity for agency is itself conditioned by class and habitus 'the categories of perception and appreciation which provide the principle of this (self) determination are themselves largely determined by the social and economic conditions of their constitution' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, 136). Indeed Lin, 1999 demonstrates that middle-class social agents do have the capacity to achieve a degree of consciousness of the importance of the fit between habitus and field and then to adjust their ways of acting to achieve a better fit. As the following discussion of capitals suggests, the capacity to adjust ways of acting according to field may characterise the habitus of successful social groups. However, it also suggests that fields are dynamic rather than static, that they are products as well as predictors of the social interactions which take place within them. As such they are subject to 'endless change' as '[t]hose who dominate in a given field are in a position to make it function to their advantage'. As they play the game, the dominant can 'transform, partially or completely, the immanent rules of the game' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, 99).

Alongside field and habitus, the concept of 'capital' forms the third pillar of Bourdieu's 'theory of practice'. The more nuanced notion of 'capital' compared with the traditional materialist notion derived from Marxist analysis (Lin, 1999; Robertson, 2013) is particularly helpful for understanding middle-class advantage in public service provision. Bourdieu argues that while the unequal distribution of economic capital (that is, income and wealth) is fundamental to understanding social inequalities (Bourdieu, 1986), it is in 'transubstantiated' form – as social and cultural capital – that it has real salience.

While Putnam's (2000) concept of social capital (as the bonds and bridges between individuals and communities) has been used extensively in social policy to understand the quality of the engagement between citizens and state (Kearns, 2003), Bourdieu's conception has received much less attention (Li et al, 2005). While both Bourdieu and Putnam see social capital as the extensiveness and durability of social networks (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Putnam, 2000), Bourdieu's conception emphasises the prestige or status of connections within a network (Grenfell, 2008). Indeed, it operates as a *capital* because its symbolic nature can buy 'position' within a specific field. Again, it is the fit of capital to field that determines its salience (Grenfell, 2008). If to possess social capital is to be networked with the powerful, then the distribution of social capital is inevitably class interested and its deployment contributes to the reproduction of class advantage. Bourdieu's version of social capital therefore emphasises the instrumentality of social capital in furthering individual ends and producing socially divisive outcomes (Portes, 2000).

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital developed as a theory capable of disrupting the 'commonsense view which sees academic success or failure as an effect of natural aptitudes' (Bourdieu, 1986, 84). For Bourdieu, 'scholastic achievement' was an effect of the class based distribution of forms of knowledge and taste and, crucially, of linguistic capital – the mastery of language as an effective means of communication and of self-presentation and a sub-form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Because of these origins, cultural capital has been particularly prominent in understanding how the provision of education services intersects with class divisions to sustain inequalities (for example, Bennett and Silva, 2006; Ball et al, 1995).

The question of the extent to which social agents are determined by the distribution of capitals also arises. On the one hand, cultural dispositions can be 'acquired...in the absence of any deliberate inculcation, and therefore quite unconsciously' (Bourdieu, 1986, 85). On the other, cultural capital can be invested in: it is a 'work on oneself (self-improvement)' (Bourdieu, 1986, 85; see also Robertson, 2013, 5). This suggests cultural capital not only provides a sense of the game – or facilitates the fit between habitus and field – but can be understood as an aspect of agency. Arguably possessing or acquiring cultural capital sensitises social agents belonging to dominant groups to the relationship between habitus and field, and facilitates adjustment either to habitus or, indeed, to field.

Two final concepts are crucial to understanding Bourdieu's theory of power and therefore of processes of dominance and advantage: 'symbolic violence' and the 'doxa'. Symbolic violence draws attention to the process by which the 'transubstantiation' of economic into social and cultural capital is obscured from view (Robertson, 2013). What is important is that symbolic violence is an 'unperceived' force of domination. As Schubert (2008, 184) argues, it is 'effective and efficient...in that members of the dominating classes need exert little energy to maintain their dominance...[they] need only go about their normal daily lives, adhering to the rules of the system that provides them their position of privilege'. Schubert quotes Bourdieu, 1977, 190: '(The dominating classes) need only *let the system they dominate take its own course* in order to exercise their domination.' (Emphasis in original.)

The concept of the doxa amplifies our understanding of how the system can simply take its course, particularly when 'social agents are not 'particles' that are pushed and pulled about by external forces' (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992, 108). The doxa relates to 'what is taken for granted, to the reality that goes unanimously unquestioned because it lies beyond any notion of enquiry' (Deer, 2008, 120). The doxa is conceptualised as the unquestioned shared beliefs which constitute fields and is an act of symbolic power in which the accumulation and distribution of capitals explains which beliefs and truths, which practices, distributions, hierarchies or sets of social relations are considered 'natural' or appropriate. For those interested in policy, it can be understood as highlighting the contingency of policy priorities which distribute resources or benefits in particular ways and of how these priorities can be 'normalised' in ways which are bound up with class dominance (Thomson, 2005). The notion of 'misrecognition' is important for linking doxa and symbolic violence. It describes 'recognising a violence which is wielded...[such that] one does not perceive it as such' (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992, 168) Misrecognition is therefore a form of 'hidden persuasion' (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992, 168) which diverts attention away from alternative understandings of the world, such as from conceptions of policy priorities and problems capable of challenging class dominance.

Bourdieu's theory of practice suggests the need to explore the production of middle-class advantage in the distribution of public service provision at both the micro-level (within particular fields) and at a more macro political level. In relation to the within-field, micro-level of analysis there are two questions to consider:

- In what ways is middle-class advantage a consequence of unconscious processes that occur as 'the system take its own course' in relation to the comfortable fit of the forms of capital and habitus enjoyed by the middle-classes to the field of public service bureaucracies?
- Is middle-class advantage a product of agentive work: a consequence of the strategic deployment of capitals, and of having sufficient cultural capital to adjust habitus to field?

In relation to macro-level of analysis, a further question arises:

- How should we understand policy priorities in the field of public services in relation to doxa and symbolic violence?

The following three sections focus on each research question in turn and re-assess the four causal theories of middle-class advantage established by Matthews and Hastings (2013) from a Bourdieusian perspective. Constraints of space mean that each section focuses on the evidence from just two spheres of public service. A Discussion section then considers the implications of this analysis for understanding what is at stake in the UK government's approach to localism. The final concluding section highlights the value of a Bourdieusian analysis of the field of public service provision.

### **Middle-class habitus and 'feel for the game' in public service provision**

One of the four causal theories highlighted the import of an alignment in the cultural capital of middle-class service users and service providers (Matthews and Hastings, 2013, 13–14). The derivation of this theory was influenced in part by the fact that education scholarship sometimes uses Bourdieusian concepts to explain how dominant social groups can feel 'like a 'fish in water'' in educational settings (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992, 126). The significance of 'cultural alignment' between service users and providers was, however, determined via the evidence of the review. The Bourdieusian frame, arguably, allows 'cultural alignment' to be understood as an aspect of the fit of habitus to field.

Within this theory of cultural alignment, three specific mechanisms emerged from the evidence on education as important in facilitating the fit of middle-class habitus to field. The first was the cultural alignment between professional parents and professional teachers and the importance of a lack of 'a differential relationship' (Crozier, 1997, 194) The evidence is that this results in such parents being more comfortable in engaging in school activities (Ball et al, 1995; Crozier, 1997) even in more egalitarian societies such as Norway (Baeck, 2010). A second mechanism identified was that middle-class parents had the necessary linguistic and cultural capital to access information on school performance. This facilitated access to the school of their choice – through, for example, effective use of appeals systems (Ball et al, 1995;

Ball et al, 2008; Archer, 2010). A third mechanism by which the fit between habitus and field was secured again depended on the capacity of parents to understand the significance of information they received on their child and to ask questions designed to elicit further information of value to them (Crozier, 1997, 195).

Scholarship in other public service spheres tends not to use a Bourdieusian frame to explain advantage. However, using such a frame to re-assess studies of micro-level interactions in healthcare settings, for example, provides rich evidence of how services align to suit a middle-class habitus and of how this fit of habitus to field delivers tangible benefits. It is clear that middle-class social agents embody the linguistic and cultural capital appropriate to the healthcare consultation. A number of studies suggest that levels of articulateness could influence the nature and quality of advice and information received by patients in a consultation (Hart and Lockey, 2002; Martin et al, 1991; Reid et al, 1999); the likelihood of an onward referral (Somerset et al, 1999; Mercer and Watt, 2007); and even whether the patient is given priority for surgery (Pell et al, 2000). More explicitly Somerset et al (1999, 218) provided evidence that GPs themselves recognised the superior fit of the habitus of middle-class patients in explaining the basis of decisions: 'The patient factor of demand... it's partly intelligence and that's of course linked to social status.'

An allied mechanism involved in cultural alignment and therefore in the fit of habitus to field is empathy. A number of studies explore how 'clinical empathy' between patient and doctor can lead to longer consultations, to more and better knowledge exchange and, indeed, to better medical outcomes (Hughes and Griffiths, 1997; Mercer and Watt, 2007; Neumann et al, 2009; May et al, 2004). What is important is that empathy is understood as a product of similarity (Neumann et al, 2009). As a mechanism conferring advantage, it would appear to work 'below the level of consciousness' (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992, 128). An aim of midwifery in the UK, for example, is to develop a 'friendship' in order to facilitate the engagement between a mother and midwife. Hart and Lockey (2002, 487) show how the model of midwifery as friendship resulted in midwives advocating for resources for the mother with whom they related to most – for women 'remarkably like themselves'. Thus, evidence from the health as well as the education sphere would suggest that cultural alignments between professional service providers and middle-class service users ensures a comfortable fit between habitus and field and, moreover, reproduces advantage without this being pursued as an explicit goal. It demonstrates how advantage is produced as the system simply 'takes its course'.

## Agentive deployment of capitals by the middle-classes in public services

Two of the causal theories of middle-class advantage derived from the realist synthesis highlighted the strategic agentive work of service users – acting on both an individual and collective basis (Matthews and Hastings, 2013, 13–14). As the earlier discussion of Bourdieu's concept of agency suggested, social agents have an uneven, class-based capacity for agency, with agency conceived of as the facility to augment the lines of action already suggested in habitus: essentially the ability to act in ways which can enhance the fit between habitus and field.

Again it is the evidence from education that is clearest on this point. McGrath and Kuriloff (1999) report how more affluent parents were comfortable asking school

administrators to introduce tracking or streaming to confer advantage on their children. The evidence from black and minority ethnic middle-class parents is also illuminating. Archer (2010) reports how these parents use their cultural capital to choose – knowingly and tactically – a middle-class over a racialised identity when it is beneficial to do so. Similarly, Crozier et al's (2008) study of those middle-class parents who choose to send their children to relatively under-performing comprehensive schools, demonstrated that they had strategically evaluated the costs and benefits of a schooling option which could be conceived as running counter to their own habitus. The study demonstrated that these parents understood that 'by employing their educational knowledge and various capitals...[they could nonetheless] ensur(e) a successful, educational experience for their children' (pp 270–1). The agentic deployment of capitals is also evident in collective action to resist school closures. Bondi's (1988) examination of anti-school closure campaigns is telling. Her evidence demonstrated how success depended on two factors: which campaigning approach was adopted and the social status of the anti-closure group. The study identified two particularly effective campaigning approaches: the factual approach 'presenting researched and reasoned reports' and the political approach, foregrounding 'political alliances between protest groups and councillors' (Bondi, 1988, 49). Those anti-closure groups which had leaders in professional occupations were able to choose the most effective approach from these options and were invariably successful. Anti-closure groups in disadvantaged areas tended to adopt a less successful, more adversarial campaigning approach. Indeed, the only disadvantaged groups to enjoy success were those that had the necessary social capital to draw professional parents into their campaign. In these instances, the change in the social composition of the group led to an adjustment in its campaigning approach in line with the expectations of the field.

This collective, agentic deployment of capitals appropriate to the conditions of the field is also apparent in land use planning. The studies of planning processes by Abram et al (1996) and Watt (2009) show how middle-class communities strategically draw upon their social capital to ensure that the individuals who represent them have the requisite cultural capital for the specific field of struggle. This might mean ensuring that a retired planner leads on a planning issue at a parish council meeting, or using pre-established links to lawyers to raise judicial objections. Indeed, Yarwood (2002) and Walker et al (2010) show that developers engaged in the planning process *expect* middle-class groups to strategically deploy their cultural capital in this way. They therefore seek to pre-empt its effectiveness – to try to ensure that field relations continue to function to the developers' advantage – by deploying arguments designed to assuage the specific fears of middle-class objectors. In Yarwood's example, affordable rural housing was presented as being for needy 'local people' in a deliberate attempt to overcome fears that housing would be allocated to needy non-locals. In this way, the rules of the game are shaped so that struggle focuses on which groups deserve affordable housing, rather than on how to effectively meet the housing needs of less advantaged groups in rural areas more generally.

By re-casting middle-class activism within a Bourdieusian frame, it becomes clear that the advantage enjoyed by middle-class groups in relation to public services derives from their embodiment of a form of habitus which affords a strong sense of the game and which allows them to play the game effectively. While there is evidence that as active agents they are able to enhance their capitals to ensure the appropriateness of these to field, there is also evidence that the field is pre-disposed, or aligned, to middle-



class habitus – to the forms of linguistic, social and cultural capital they embody. The notion of alignment suggests that service providers can be complicit in this process. It also points to the dynamic, dialectical relationship between habitus and field, to the idea that fields are the product of the struggles that take place within them and are therefore shaped by processes of domination.

## Policy priorities in the field of public services: the implications of doxa and symbolic violence

The fourth and final causal theory derived from the realist synthesis explained middle-class advantage as a product of the ‘normalisation’ of middle-class needs in policy processes (Matthews and Hastings, 2013, 13–14). The Bourdieusian concepts of doxa and symbolic violence are helpful for understanding the class divisive implications of normalisation within such processes.

The regressive distribution of public service provision noted at the outset of the paper can be viewed as evidence of doxa – of a silence to the symbolic violence constituted by affluent groups over the non-affluent. In particular, where strategic decision-making over the appropriateness of the allocation of resources fails to compensate for need, this can be understood as misrecognition of the needs of poorer groups. Studies of the resourcing of street cleaning and other environmental services relative to neighbourhood deprivation illustrate this (Hastings, 2009a; 2009b; Hastings et al, 2013). This work with local authorities identified a set of risk factors which predicted the vulnerability of neighbourhoods to poor environmental outcomes, such as particular demographic profiles and urban forms. What is important is that while these risk factors were identified by service providers as explaining variations in environmental cleanliness, they were not used to determine appropriate levels of service. An unintentional, systemic and rarely questioned bias was evidenced – effectively a misrecognition of the needs of deprived neighbourhoods. Indeed, in one authority there was a substantial skew in the resources for routine, basic services, *towards* affluent streets (Hastings, 2009a). The research also illuminated processes by which misrecognition arises. It found that middle-class residents routinely deployed their cultural capital to complain when they perceived services to be inadequate. They also had the social capital necessary to complain to senior officers or elected representatives (Hastings, 2009b). The research concluded that, as a result, an incremental alignment of the level and quality of services required to meet middle-class expectations and minimise complaints was normalised by front line staff and in strategic resource allocation and service design (Hastings, 2009a).

A second example of doxa is the choice agenda within public services, an agenda which, as the Introduction showed, has evolved over the past 30 years as a means to ‘empower’ consumers of public services. Arguably, choice can be thought of as doxic when the view goes unquestioned that it is a means to empower all, equally. Such a view runs counter to the evidence which suggests that the benefits of choice are not equally shared. In relation to schooling at least, it is the most affluent that gain the most from the choice agenda. This was evident from studies in the realist synthesis which demonstrated how choice worked with the grain of middle-class habitus. In particular, the circuits of schooling literature (Ball et al, 1995) highlights how middle-class parents are in the right social circuits to gain the social and cultural capital – the soft knowledge – necessary to access the ‘right’ school. Further, they are also able

to deploy pre-existing capitals within these circuits. The recognition of this by the UK government in England led, in 2006, to the creation of local authority ‘choice advisers’ to support parents without these capitals to make a ‘good’ school choice. These ‘choice advisers work to ensure parents adjust to politically mandated norms through inducing their active enlistment as informed and discriminating subjects’ (Wilkins, 2013, 5). Moreover, the British Social Attitudes Survey demonstrates that the ‘working classes’ (social classes II and III) are the group most in favour of choice in public services while those in managerial and professional occupations (class 1) demonstrate least support (Curtice et al, 2009). The contradiction that those who support the policy most, gain the least from it, is again suggestive of the operation of of doxa.

By exploring the evidence and theories of middle-class advantage established in Matthews and Hastings 2013 from a Bourdeusian perspective, the role of a set of fundamental social processes has been illuminated: the fit of middle-class habitus to field; the distribution and strategic deployment of capitals; and the pre-disposition of the field of public services to middle-class interests. The discussion which follows explores the potential of the current UK government’s version of localism to sustain and perhaps amplify the effects of these processes and deliver further advantage to middle-class groups.

## **Discussion: could Localism and the Big Society empower the powerful?**

The question of whether localism affords a good fit between the habitus of the middle-classes and the field of public service provision can be explored with reference to the nature of the infrastructure developed to support participatory processes. Community capacity building within localism is largely delivered through a ‘Community Organiser’ programme which, although high in profile, is limited in both scope and reach (Rolfé, 2014). The level of support offered contrasts markedly with that delivered in the 1990s and 2000s to support both choice and voice. Thus initiatives such as New Deal for Communities attempted to give deprived communities a voice with regard to major change (Durose and Richardson, 2009) while ‘choice advisers’ were targeted towards disadvantaged parents with respect to schooling (Wilkins, 2013). These interventions were based on the recognition that, in conditions of social inequality, participation takes place on an ‘uneven playing field’ (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001). Indeed, direct state support for ‘capacity building’ approaches (Chanan and Miller, 2011) historically provided a context in which disadvantaged groups could build the skills and experience necessary to ‘play the game’ effectively.

The realist review evidence suggested that better off groups tend to possess the requisite skills to participate effectively – indeed that they embody these in their habitus. This would suggest that middle-class participation will not be damaged by the ‘rolling back’ of state support for participation. This is borne out by early research which suggests that ‘affluent, prosperous and well-educated people are ready to take up the challenge (of localism)’ (Pugalis and McGuinness, 2012, 348). Indeed, given the competitive struggle that characterises the field, these groups are likely to be further advantaged by the withdrawal of support for participation in disadvantaged communities. It is by means of this support that poor communities were able to develop ‘appropriate’ ways of communication and access to the kinds of knowledge

required for effective participation. Their capacity to accrue the necessary cultural capital is, arguably, undermined therefore. Given the evidence on the significance of alignments in cultural capital, there is a danger that this will exacerbate inequality by reinforcing the impact of mechanisms which empower the powerful. Moreover, by disinvesting in community capacity building, localism also de-values forms of social capital which emphasise the extensiveness of trust and reciprocity within and between communities and, rather, valorises Bourdieusian forms which emphasise connectivity to power and influence. In essence the context provided by localism favours citizens who either already know how to play the game, or who know people who can play it for them.

Localism would also appear to empower the powerful by providing a beneficial context for the strategic deployment of agency – the second question provoked by the Bourdieusian analysis. It places a clear responsibility on citizens to identify their own needs and then to act on these: it shifts the ‘onus...to communities from government’ (Pugalis and McGuiness, 2012, 350; see also Rolfe, 2014). Thus, the ‘right to challenge’ the way in public services are delivered, for example, not only requires autonomous, agentive action in relation to identifying the problem; but also in relation to imagining the solution and, in many cases, in delivering it. Localism would therefore appear to privilege forms of agency in which citizens take on responsibility for solving the problems they identify. This is in contrast with previous approaches to participation often characterised as ‘top down’ and led by state rather than citizens. Indeed, one of the last acts of the Labour governments was to place a ‘duty to involve’ on all public service bodies (Durose and Rees, 2012) – in effect suggesting that responsibility for triggering participation rested with the state rather than with citizens. In this sense, localism can be understood as deepening the choice agenda – freeing up citizens to ‘choose’ whether or not to act on their own behalf. However, the forms of agency preferred by localism are not evenly distributed and, indeed, can be understood as an aspect of the habitus of dominant social groups. ‘Rolling back’ state support for capacity building for disadvantaged groups reinforces this uneven distribution and arguably affords an *expanded* space for the agency of middle-class groups. Evidence from the early implementation the first wave of applications for Free Schools supports this argument. Higham (2013, 9) found that the proposers of these schools ‘comprised of professional parents and established and mainstream organisations that share a common aim to develop an academically focused school’. Similarly, all but three of the 17 neighbourhood planning pilots were located in affluent rural villages facing development pressure for new housing, and the location of further neighbourhood plans shows a clear spatial bias away from deprived neighbourhoods.<sup>1</sup>

The third and final question identified as part of the Bourdieusian frame was the need to identify normalisation and the operation of the doxa. In this respect, localism arguably begins to recast how we think about the purpose of participation in public services. Thus, under previous Labour Governments, participation was conceived as a means to deliver more equitable outcomes from public services, working alongside a state conceived to play its own strategic, distributive role. Within localism, participation is conceived as a means to deliver differentiated services. As the government argues: ‘Decentralisation will allow different communities to do different things in different ways to meet their different needs. This will certainly increase variety in service provision...such variation will reflect the conscious choices made by local people’ (CLG, 2010, 5). This would appear to be indicative of a concept of participation

which engages with the logic of ‘market’ rather than state forms of distribution. It assumes that citizens are free to choose better services, and indeed that providers of public services will alter their ‘product’ to meet variations in need. Further all citizens are presumed to have equal capability in the market. A Bourdieusian perspective suggests that public service provision is not a market, but a field. It makes clear that the capitals necessary to engage successfully in this field are unevenly distributed and that, in the process of deploying them, middle-class service users contribute to exacerbating inequality.

## Conclusion

This paper illuminates the class-based processes by which better-off groups secure advantage in public service provision. It contributes to a small but growing literature which seeks to understand who benefits and how from public service provision. It is the first attempt to explore how Pierre Bourdieu’s theorisation of power and domination can be used to explain the distribution of the benefits of public services beyond the sphere of education. The paper thus demonstrates the centrality of forms of symbolic power in middle class capture. In particular, the analysis reveals the importance of the alignment or fit between the habitus of the middle class and the competitive struggles which characterise the field of public service provision. It shows how the unjust outcomes of these struggles are either hidden from view or normalised in policy processes. Finally, the analysis exposes how the possession of social and cultural capital is important in securing success in these struggles, not least because it confers the capacity to adjust one’s habitus in order to align better with field relations, as well to change the nature and operation of the field.

From a policy analysis perspective, perhaps the most significant contribution which the Bourdieusian lens affords is to illuminate how dominant social groups are able to change fields to make them ‘function to their advantage... (by) transform (ing... the rules of the game’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, 99). Given the focus of the paper on the UK government’s localism agenda and, specifically, on the shifts this implies for citizen–state relations and the power of the already powerful, the idea that dominant groups are capable of influencing and adjusting the nature and basis of the struggles within fields is important. Thus, while the overall trajectory of citizen–state relations since the 1980s has been largely to valorise choice, the New Labour years were also characterised by an emphasis on voice, particularly as a means to facilitate disadvantaged groups in claiming a more equitable share of the benefits of the state. As indicated, a capacity-building infra-structure was put in place to support this, although the extent to which there was genuine commitment to a new kind of participatory politics is a matter of dispute. Notwithstanding such concerns, it is *just* possible that the context for participation in the late 1990s and 2000s could have led to quite substantial empowerment for disadvantaged groups. The localism project could – perhaps – be understood as a more or less conscious attempt by the dominant classes to re-align the field of public services and to adjust the rules of the game in order to regain advantages they may have perceived themselves to have lost. Bourdieu’s social theory applied in policy analysis opens up new ways of understanding, and potential future research, in relation to who benefits from policy changes, to how regressive distributions of the benefits of public services not only come about, but

are normalised and sustained. It represents a shift away from focusing on subalterns and the non-powerful to problematising dominant groups in society.

### Note

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